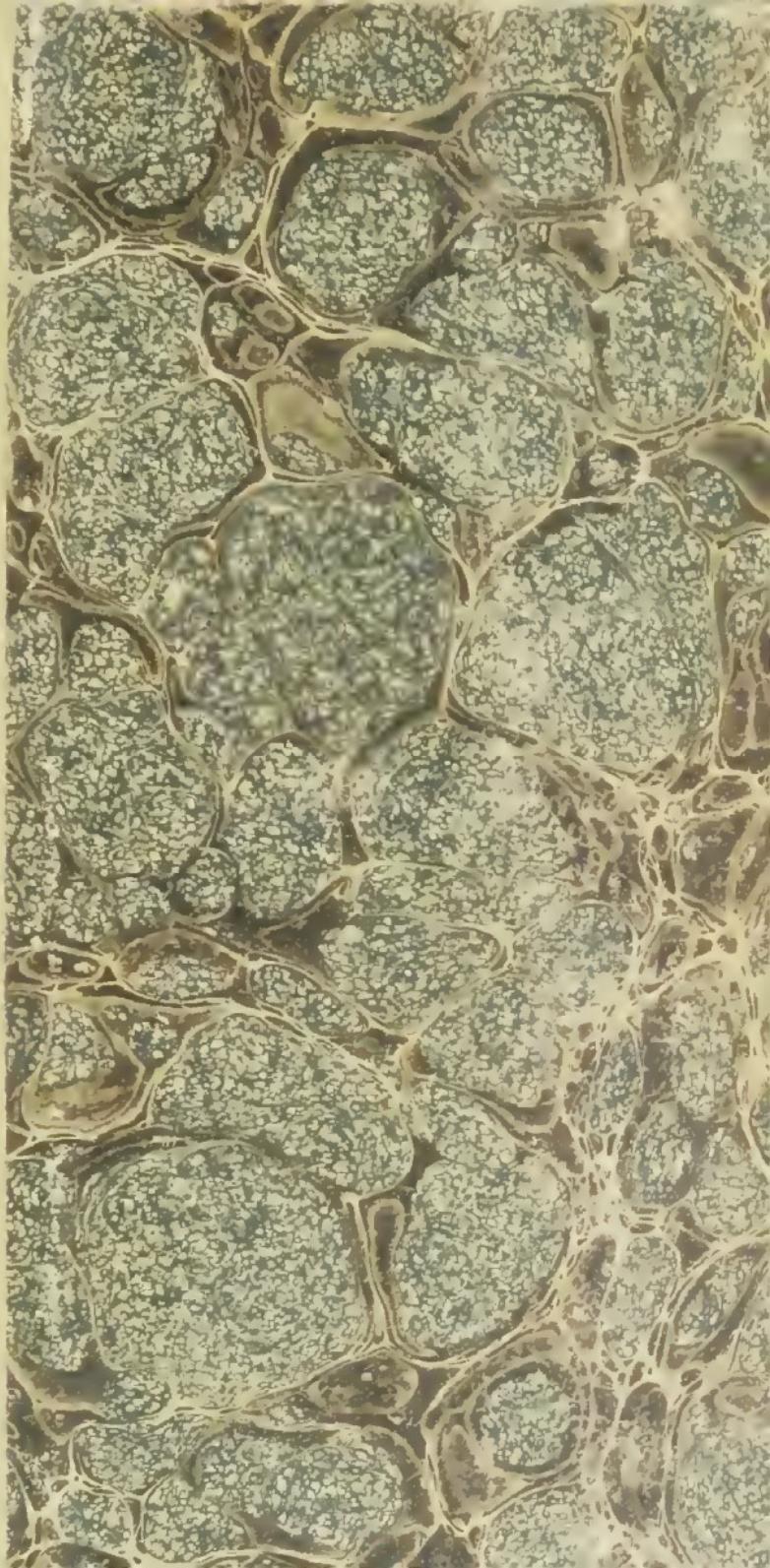


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A NOVICIATE
FOR MARRIAGE

BY

MRS. H. ELLIS.

PRICE FOURPENCE.

A Novitiate for Marriage.

THE problems of labour and of sex rule the century. A strong protest against tyranny and injustice is in our midst, claiming, in the name of democracy, the practical solidarity of man. Equality of opportunity is the demand which lies at the root of socialistic propaganda. Labour is emphatic in its aims and its pleas: there is no fear in England that the workers' wrongs will be left unrighted through want of plain speaking. Labour has her opportunity for open discussion in the press and the market-place, and a probable victory is before her through the recognised legitimacy of her claim for experiments in the political arena.

Sex questions, on the other hand, stand comparatively little chance for their near solution, simply because the market-place, the pulpit, the doctor's consulting-room, the nursery, and the schoolroom either ignore these questions altogether or quibble them away from the standpoint of "reason," "virility," and "clean-mindedness." Latter-

day puritanism is the bitter foe of healthy sexuality. But to play at blind-man's-buff with problems upon which hang the final solution of our economic difficulties is simply to delay the epoch of social equality towards which we are slowly tending. Hunger and love, through the demands of labour and sex, have to be faced together and met in a rough naked way as primary necessities of human as well as brute life. Hunger we are disposed to countenance as a respectable necessity which every citizen may claim to have satisfied through the united efforts of the whole community: we are willing to face it squarely and see what can be done to meet Dame Nature in her request that, given a mouth, a man shall have the wherewithal to fill it.

Love, an equally imperative claim in normal manhood and womanhood, stands sniggering or shamefaced in her plea for frank treatment. Latter-day puritanism, in its helplessness, settles the matter by an old world asceticism which begs the question of real needs, and offers monkish swathing-bands as a cure for atrophied limbs. Love, under the name of legal marriage, is practically left to fend for itself in happy-go-lucky unions, which smack of the gambling spirit inherent in the otherwise stolid blood of England.

(No one can deny that marriage to-day, under conventional codes, is a mere game of chance—a throw of the dice for a man and a woman—a leap in the dark, with no honourable return-path.) Marriage maxims form a code of worldly ethics which has as its frontispiece the figure of a sneering hag with her finger on her lip. We English are steeped to the lips in convention about sexual matters. Marriage has become so entangled in commercialism, in tradition, in doll's house conventions, and in slipshod sentimentalities, that it is almost impossible to get a glimpse of the simple face of love, who stands wounded and forgotten behind the gaunt prudes who preside over sexual ethics. Prostitution, (with no diploma from Love,) hysteria, anæmia, insanity, with no hall-mark from Nature, are the prices we pay for our conventional code of morality.

The minimum of sexual decency and happiness amongst us is obtained at a cost of mental suffering and perverted natural instinct which no amount of prudent veiling can hide from the eyes of those who dig beneath the social surface. Men and women, exhausted by excess or stunted by repression, are the living protests against the mock puritanism which is one of the national sins of England.) The evolution of

sex has not come about in a day, nor will the evolution of human love ostracise lust in a year. Hounding abnormal sexual offenders to death, and wearing white ribbons as a sign of our own worthiness, will not help poor, suffering, ignorant humanity to a new vision of healthy sexuality. The saviours of this, as of every corrupt and stupid generation, must feel the pulse of the adulterer as well as that of his victim, and stand clear-eyed and honest as pioneers of the new sexual renaissance, which will probably combine a healthy, temperate animalism with Browning's vision of that rare mating when soul lies by soul. The qualities the pioneers of this sexual renaissance need is a simple, sane courage which will force sincerity to the front and insist upon experiment.¹ The very root of the whole sex question is the absolute economic and social independence of woman, so that love may be freed from commercialism and able to clearly face its own needs.¹ In order to attain this we shall inevitably have to try experiments which will bring social ostracism on those who have the honesty to put their principles into practice.

It is an experiment of this kind I wish to propose. The marriage question might possibly lose some of its complexity if the British matron would accept, in place of the

stereotyped engagement, a veritable noviciate of marriage. Such a noviciate would be more coercive to the socially trained conscience of intelligent men and women than any existing marriage laws, which are practically ignored by the vicious, and outstripped in conduct by the educated. Love stands for ever outside law courts and eludes the scientist, but its practical outcome is quite as much the concern of the state and the race as of the individual.

An apprenticeship to marriage, which would be a noviciate for fatherhood and motherhood, as well as a training in household work and management, is surely no more to be feared by right-minded men and women than an apprenticeship to the army or the navy. Custom declares that an engagement shall be announced before even acquaintanceship in its full sense is begun; legal marriage is clamoured for as a precautionary measure before mutual knowledge. That so many marriages are tolerably happy, and that some few are unregretted, is surely due to the fact that, in spite of our haphazard wooing, some unknown spiritual law of affinity takes the side of Love in the game of life. A noviciate of marriage, as open as an engagement, would surely minimise the gambling element in modern unions, and pave the way to true monogamy, which to-day, with prostitution and secret temporary unions

accepted as inevitable evils, is simply a name Respectability and Idealism accept, but life too frequently denies. If by monogamy we mean one man having one woman, and one woman cleaving to one man for sexual love, we all know, if we are out of our teens, that the monogamic marriage in Great Britain is either extinct or has never really evolved. The latter is surely the real state of affairs, and if, as the tendency of modern progress indicates, monogamy is the most complete form of human sexual relationship, it is certain that in order to obtain it in reality we must open the way to free discussion on sexual matters. As a preliminary step to rational discussion we must educate our boys and girls in the physical and psychical facts of sexual life, and finally allow honest experiments to adults, in order that marriage, when it really comes to men and women, may be the sanest, deepest, and purest incentive to a life of real citizenship. The mere word of the clergyman or the registrar sanctifies, in the eyes of convention, what is in the majority of unions adultery on the man's side and a plunge into animalism on the woman's side. Repression and excess meet in the name of love, and the bread and wine which life can offer but once to a man and a woman as a veritable sacrament are devoured gluttonously upon the altar steps.

To prevent unhappy marriages is surely a saner method than to facilitate divorce after souls and bodies have become permanently injured through the orthodox experiment which begins after legal marriage. A would-be nun before she takes the white veil enters into a noviciate which is to acquaint her with all the offices and responsibilities of a convent life, without the formal declaration which merges the experiment into a life-covenant. If at the end of the noviciate in the sisterhood a woman finds that her nature is unfitted for what she considers the most sacred life on earth, she frankly says so, and, without any reflection on her character from the lady superior or her fellows, she goes back to the world and finds her work there. "She has no vocation," is the verdict of the religious coterie upon her action, and her withdrawal from the convent is looked upon as a wise step, a nun being born and not made, they argue. A noviciate of marriage, of only twelve months' duration, the period of an ordinary engagement, freed from conventional restraints, and backed by a childhood and youth educated in the simple facts of sexual life, so that no mystery other than the subtle one of pure love could taint the experiment, would surely lessen the grim divorce list we read of in the papers, and the grimmer record we find in our private circle, where

divorce may or may not creep in to undo our social blunders.⁽¹⁾

By a noviciate of marriage, I mean exactly what a nun means when she takes the white veil. She believes she has a vocation for a religious life. She cannot be certain of this at first, for here, as in marriage, a halo is round the heads of the initiated, and a veritable religious spell is over the whole convent life, towards which she yearns as she kneels in the chapel, with the incense, the flowers, and the singing wakening into life the romantic energies which claim heart, hand, and head when the feet stand for the first time before the altar of the ideal. Life to the young girl is a sweet, thrilling romance. Abandonment, renunciation and suffering become the only beautiful things in the world; they are seen through the flowers and incense, as she has read of them in her books, heard of them from priests, and glorified them in her enthusiastic longings. No rude, coarse hand draws aside the veil and proclaims the commonplace. For six months she is a mere probationer, and lives, as it were, on the outside of the mystery of religious life. During this time she probably feels her vocation increasing, and when this period has expired she readily takes the white veil, which makes her a novice,

who has to abide by the rules of the religious life for two years before the black veil, the oath, the parchment deed, and the ring are taken as signs of her eternal chastity. As in the religious life there is no pruriency to hide, no natural function to deprecate, the girl is led naturally from the dreams of a probationer to the realities of a novice, and for two years she faces the life of a nun as a practical woman. For a religious to wish to draw back after two and a half years of trial, with a full experience of convent life, from which the spell has gone, and into which the fret and jar of daily work have entered, to make a stronger demand on ideals, would be looked upon either as disease or the deliberate enervation of the moral nature, upon which the devil could get a foothold. As a proof of the security of the experiment, it is well known that it is the rarest occurrence for a nun who has taken the black veil to wish to withdraw from her vow. The public oath is the mere culmination to a multitude of experiments which have tested the fitness of the woman for a religious life. An ecclesiastic, appointed to receive a large salary from his bishop, in order to divorce women from their vow of chastity and obedience, would probably have a very easy time of it, as prevention in the religious life has taken the place of cure, and weeded out at an early period of the

experiment the individuals who would throw discredit on the religious life, either through remaining in it, or wishing, later on, to be divorced from it. The gambling element is abolished in the matter; commercial considerations or hysterical restlessness have no place here; deliberate choice, a lengthy experiment, and a full knowledge of the offices and obligations attendant on the sacred life precede the formal declaration which makes the covenant life-long.

Is there anything analogous to this in the preparation of a man and a woman for a state which, if not called religious, has as its sequel the most vital consequences to the community? The answer can only be in the negative. The ordinary engagement, among the middle classes at any rate, needs no comment; if its consequences were not so tragic it would be irresistibly funny. An argus-eyed chaperone conducts the young couple from the "proposal" to the altar, and often even assists at the proposal. As a rule a stern matron hovers around the steps of the youth and the girl, in order to pounce, with energy worthy of a better cause, upon the first sign on the man's part of "intentions." The vulgarity of the little drama is unparalleled. The marriage probation begins under the name of an "engagement." The chaperone occasionally puts on sun-spectacles,

and relaxes her authority at convenient seasons, but it is rarely that a man and maid are allowed that large margin to their engagement which would enable them in any real sense to know one another. In face of the fact that marriage differs from other relationships only on its physical side, girls are taught that it is immodest and unwomanly to discuss sexual questions with their future husbands until the legal contract is completed. It is a matter of every-day knowledge that hundreds of women marry with no clear idea of the sexual function which they promise to fulfil; marry in the stage of romance and girlish enthusiasm in which a probationer first dons her lace cap, to enter realities with the slender equipment for dreams.

In the unwedded girl's idealised love-world nothing is even sanely virile; brusqueness or brutality is not imaginable in marriage, which only presupposes romantic love. Her vision of sweet sacrifice, of soul-mating, of a love-life lifted for ever out of ruts and vulgarities, is akin to the vision of the religious bride who kneels at the entrance of a convent chapel, and forgets, amid incense and flowers, that the world of religious fervour has often bare boards, hair shirts, and narrow cells, which neither priest, flowers, nor music can convert into a child's fairy vision. Young girls who enter marriage with this equipment, and without

even a true theoretical knowledge of sexual life, are often as much shocked and unnerved by the virility of true manhood as if they had been caught in their sleep by the coarse paws of a satyr. If the walls of certain fashionable sea-side hotels could tell their secrets, we should have object-lessons enough to prove that the majority of women walk into marriage as sheep walk into a slaughter-house from a quiet field, in absolute unconsciousness of the fate awaiting them until the door is shut and cries are of no avail.

When we add to this negative attitude on the woman's part the positive one assumed by men, through their previous experiences, we have additional evidence that in the mooted question of modern wedlock what we need as a first step is absolute sincerity between a man and a woman before a legal contract is signed.

Society, under a mistaken idea that in this matter prudery and silence may cover a multitude of venial sins, gives no quarter to an open noviciate for marriage. Convention would question the sanity of the woman who frankly refused to enter into a contract of which she did not know the full conditions; in face of an open experiment to test these conditions, fashion would simply close her doors upon what would appear to her as an indecent

precedent. Unlike the Catholic church in its dealings with novices, Society demands the ring, the parchment and the vow as a preliminary to the knowledge and experience; hence adulteries, the divorce court, home-prisons, and the increase of cant and pruriency in the community. Unless a woman knows what a man's body is like, with its virile needs, and realises to the full her own adult necessities, how is it possible that she can have the faintest conception as to whether the romantic, passionate impulse a man awakens in her is the trinity of love, trust, and reverence, which alone lays the foundations of real marriage?

Dr. Strahan in his book on "Marriage and Disease" brings together statistics which are grim and educative, and may stand for a warning to those people who think that family or personal "ghosts," in the form of inherited disease or degeneration, may be concealed until legal marriage has secured an economic position for women and a recognised sexual safety-valve for men.

The steady increase of insanity in England and Wales at a rate of over 1,500 a year, the numerous deaths from syphilis among young children, combined with the prevalence of epilepsy, which is so often the result of inherited tendencies, point strongly to the need for

pre-marital knowledge on family as well as individual peculiarities. It is curious to find how uneducated the public conscience is in these matters of inheritance, when it countenances and even encourages marital cheating, but looks upon commercial swindling as eminently disreputable.

In addition to the necessity for perfect frankness with regard to private and family histories, and the need for thorough sexual knowledge, the difficulties which arise from a want of understanding of individual temperament have also to be faced. Habits of many years' standing, trivial egoisms, and small idiosyncrasies may play as much havoc with the chances for conjugal happiness as vice itself. If two people were to inhabit the same house for only a year it would be impossible to conceal peculiarities and moods calling for the give-and-take process, which has such an educative and sobering effect even in the most ideal marriages, and which in a pre-marital trial would soon either educate the novices for wedlock into the beauty of true interdependence, or prove to them beyond doubt that it is best for some men to live alone, and for some women also. The experiment would also diminish the evil effects of what may be called the sex-spell, which is simply the subtle magnetic attrac-

tion between a man and a woman which hypnotises their reason and drives them impetuously to passion's end. Life is full of stories of the disillusionment which follows the frantic clutching of the flower of love, heedless of the death to the promise of fruit. A friend of mine travelled in a P. and O. steamer, some years ago, with such a couple of spell-bound lovers. When the newly-made bride and bridegroom came on board no words could convey the husband's tenderness and effusiveness to his bride. The spell was so potent that they were utterly oblivious to the comments of their less absorbed companions. At Gibraltar they had quarrelled; at Malta they had become so rude to one another that the passengers tried to make peace; at Bombay the man was in irons for beating his wife. In this instance the process of disillusionment was rapid, but the same drama is often drawn over a few years as a result of unfledged marriages, where a mere physical impulse or a hysterical restlessness flings a man or woman into a partnership for which they are not morally, mentally, or even physically equipped, and which has in it for the individual and the community the most momentous issues.

After the first declaration of love an engaged couple, under existing conventionalities, are monopolised almost

directly by trivialities, through the trousseau, the wedding gifts, congratulations, settlements, and the endless etceteras which revolve round an ordinary marriage. The man and woman prepare to enter into a veritable holy of holies in the full glare of the hurrahing crowd, which throws rice and shoes almost into the bridal chamber itself, and dims that strong vision of passion and abandonment wherein a man and woman read in each other's eyes that they are as little children before the rapt face of deathless love.

In advocating a noviciate of marriage as a preventive of unhappy unions, and a possible step towards the abolition of prostitution on the one hand and of sexual repression on the other, I do not wish to imply that in an experiment of the kind advanced in this paper there should of necessity be actual cohabitation. In fact, the absolute criminality of bringing a child into the world, who would have no voice in its legitimacy or illegitimacy, needs particular emphasis in pleading for perfect frankness between two people before a civil contract announces to the community that an absolute sexual relationship is established.⁽²⁾ The experiment is not advocated in the hope that "free love," as it is miscalled, should take the place of monogamy in the community, but that freedom and sincerity shall be encouraged, so that actual monogamy

may have a chance to try its fate among a people who worship it as an ideal, but whose feet are far from its temple. Nothing but open experiment and perfect sincerity as to results can rid us of our pruriency and cant in this question. It is surely the question of the age, without which Labour cannot balance her accounts with Capital, for woman to-day, owing to the conventional attitude assumed towards wifehood and motherhood, is the greatest slave and parasite in the community. Her economic freedom will arrive at the same time that Labour gets justice, for the two questions are based on the same demand for equality of personality and equality of opportunity, and in both battles experiments must be risked, and men and women must have the courage of their opinions.

The objection, which will be raised at once, that a noviciate for marriage will demand good men and good women as experimentalists, and that their example will be followed for the ends of lust and not for the means of love, is answered by the fact that the marriages of the moment do not, through their legality, ostracise lust. No law and no experiment can actually create pure men and honest women, compel temperance, or evolve purity. All we can do is to offer the chance for sincerity in place of hypocrisy,

and give an open field for the possible evolution of monogamic marriage.

In advancing this plea for a noviciate of marriage, it must not be understood that in the writer's mind there is any intention of dragging marriage into the region of the mechanical or commonplace. It is, on the contrary, a plea for an experiment which will give love full scope, so that commercialism and trickery may be divorced from wedlock, and public life may be strengthened and broadened through influences which have had their birth in a harmonious private experience.

EDITH ELLIS.

(1) A distinguished Roman Catholic priest told Alexandre Dumas that out of one hundred women who married, eighty came to him afterwards and said that they regretted it.

(2) The custom of "hand-fasting," rare now anywhere else, still prevails to some extent in Iceland. "A man and woman contract to live together for a year. If at the end of the year the parties agree thereto, they are married; if not, they separate without stigma on either side. The contract may be made conditionally binding from the first. It may bind the parties to marry in the event of issue, or in the event of no issue, as the case may be."—Prof. Mavor, "Iceland: Some Sociological and Other Notes," *Proceedings Philosophical Society, Glasgow*, 1890-1.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

DEMOCRACY IN THE KITCHEN

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THE MASSES AND CLASSES: A PLEA

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HIGH STOATLEY COTTAGE,
HASLEMERE, SURREY.

